The Fourth Church Pulpit

TO TOUCH A LEPER . . .
RELIGION BECOMING SUBVERSIVE

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Scripture: Isaiah 40:21-31, Mark 1:40-45

"Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. . ."
–Mark 1:41 (NRSV)

It had been a long time since he had put his arms around his wife, held his son close, cradled his baby to his chest, kissed his aging mother, embraced his father. He had not touched another human being since that day months ago – or was it a year now? – when the priest had examined him and determined that the blemishes on his skin were leprosy. He had noticed them first when he took his cloak off while fishing. He had hoped the spots would go away, but they did not. Instead they seemed to be deepening and spreading. And when his companions noticed, he knew he had to go to the priest.

The priest, in turn, knew what he had to do when he saw the dreaded blotches on his skin. The Book of the Law, Leviticus, Chapter 13, verses 45 and 46:

> "The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone: his dwelling shall be outside the camp."

And so, that is how he had lived – alone, outside the village, isolated for so long he had lost track of time until that day when he found Jesus.

The idea of uncleanness is important in the ancient religion. A person could become unclean in a lot of ways: by eating food that was taboo, or touching blood, or being around a corpse, engaging in forbidden sexual acts, and by having any kind of skin disease. The taboos often – not always – but often turn out to have some scientific merit. Cleanliness is a good idea. It is not a good idea to risk infection, or to eat meat that may be spoiling. And sexual activity that does not result in conception and birth, and those are the ones that are forbidden, by and large, does not build up the nation and the community numerically.

More important were the social implications. Unclean meant unfit for contact with the rest of the community and unfit for worship in the Synagogue. Unclean meant separated from family and from God. Unclean meant outcast, utter alienation, absolute aloneness, without hope for restoration until a priest verified that whatever condition prompted the initial diagnosis was gone, or that an appropriate time elapsed since the unclean person was thought to be contaminated and contagious. Once a month, and after giving birth, for instance, a woman was thought to be unclean, until the prescribed time elapsed.

One of the ways you got to be unclean was by having leprosy. When the Bible uses that term it actually refers to any abnormality, discoloration, or eruption of the skin. Modern diagnostic techniques were unknown obviously. Leprosy surely included Hansen's Disease, the modern medical name for leprosy; but it included a lot more: simple skin conditions we know as psoriasis, eczema - perhaps even forms of acne.

In his memoir, *Self Consciousness,* John Updike, who has suffered all his life with psoriasis, has written a chapter, "At War With My Skin," and talks about how, as an adolescent, he had to organize his life around not exposing himself to embarrassment. One time he wrote a short story, *From the Journal of A Leper.*

The ancient world lived in fear of leprosy and dealt with it, and all skin disease, in the only way it knew how – isolation.

New Testament scholar, Fred Craddock, commenting on this story, says,

> "Into every culture sooner or later come diseases so mysterious and so threatening that they are met primarily with fear and ignorance. Having no explanation or treatment, religious, social and political forces join in the demand that the diseased persons be removed from sight, isolated from all domestic, religious and commercial contact." [*Interpretation*]

And so this is the man who comes to Jesus. He is no abstraction. I don't know anything about him except his condition, but I think I know enough about being human to wonder what it must be like to have no contact with other people, to lose your job, your family and your friends, and even your faith community: to know yourself unfit to be touched, to cover your mouth and warn anyone who happens to come close, "I'm unclean"; not be with those you love most, perhaps to sit on a hill outside town and watch them, to go at night to the spot where they leave food for you. One commentator says that the man is in mourning for his lost life because he is quite dead.

This is the one who breaks all the rules and comes to Jesus and says in total confidence borne of his absolute desperation,

> "If you choose, you can make me clean." Notice, not – "Make me well, make me better, heal my leprosy," but "make me clean – fit – acceptable – restore me to my family, my community, my Synagogue."

Mark is writing this story maybe thirty-five years after the fact. He's still introducing the story of Jesus of Nazareth in the little book he's writing and he remembers even the detail that Jesus was moved by pity and that he was so moved he did something unheard of: something radically subversive to the religious and social and political structures of his society. He, Mark remembers, stretched out his hand and touched the man. "I do choose," he said. "Be clean." And that's what happened.

Now there is a wonderful caveat about this dramatic story. We are trying, in these sermons, to learn what we can about the story of Jesus, the Quest of the Historical Jesus. And we have acknowledged that our only source of information is the Bible, which in the case of the story of Jesus was not written down until at least a generation had passed. Mark is the first to write it down but he doesn't start until about thirty-five or forty years after the fact: like trying to recall exactly what happened one afternoon in 1954. Furthermore, we don't have the originals. What we have are copies of copies of copies. And unless you believe that God inspires copiers and editors, the task of scholarship is to keep pushing back into history, digging around in old caves and archeological sites and fourth century monastery libraries for fragments of ancient manuscripts which might be older and therefore closer to the source than anything we yet have. In the process of doing that, the scholars discover some variances, not big ones but sometimes important ones. In this story, for instance, some of those ancient manuscripts say Jesus wasn't moved by pity at all. It was anger! You can look it up. There's a footnote for Mark 1:41 which says,

> "Other ancient authorities read anger."
> "Moved with anger, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him."

Anger? At what? At the man's presumptuousness, his brash breaking of tradition? It doesn't feel like that to me. Anger at a disease which takes life from innocent people? Anger at a religious tradition, a religious rule that ends up in conflict with the heart and will of God as Jesus thinks he knows it? Anger at religion, of all things, denying God's Kingdom in which there are all sorts of people who are not acceptable in polite, civil, righteous, religious circles?

That's how Mark introduces Jesus: associating with fishermen, sinners, tax collectors, lepers – all gathered into a kind of community no one had ever seen before – the family of God. I think it was both compassion and anger: God's inclusive love for this poor man and God's impatience with the way religious people, God's people, keep missing the point and keep finding ways to restrict who gets in, who is okay, who is acceptable, morally correct, clean.

John Dominic Crossan, in his controversial book, *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography*, says about Jesus touching the leper,

> "That act deliberately impugns the rights and prerogatives of society's boundary keepers and controllers. Jesus acted as an alternative boundary keeper in a way subversive to the established procedures of society." [p. 82-83]

Crossan who teaches Biblical studies at DePaul asks the toughest questions and proposes clear common sense answers that people often don't want to hear. For instance, about this incident he asks "What actually would one have seen?" His answer is "not much." But then he presents a very interesting and helpful explanation that gets at the meaning of the incident. He points out that medical anthropology and comparative ethno-medicine distinguishes between "curing a disease" and "healing an illness." Illness is something patients experience. Disease is an abnormality in structure or function.

"Disease," he says, "is between my doctor, me and a bug. Illness is between my neighbor and me."

> "The leper who met Jesus had a disease (say, psoriasis) and an illness, the social stigma of uncleanness, isolation and rejection. And as long as the disease stayed or got worse, the illness would also stay and get worse. But - what if the disease could not be healed, but the illness could somehow be healed?" That's what Crossan thinks happened. . . "Jesus healed the illness by refusing to accept the disease's ritual uncleanness and social ostracization." [p. 80-82]

Whatever happened to the man's skin, Jesus healed his illness by subverting religious and social custom. He touched him and restored him to the human community: reached out and embraced him, physically pulled him into a new community that does not reject, ostracize and exclude, a new community he called the Kingdom of God, a kingdom into which you and I are invited and which we, as his people, are called to exhibit to our world.

Professor Crossan writes,

> "A cure for AIDS is absolutely desirable but in its absence, we can still heal the illness by refusing to ostracize those who have it, by empathizing with their anguish, and by enveloping their suffering with both respect and love." [p. 81]

It's what the motion picture "Philadelphia" is about. Tom Hanks is a hot young lawyer who, shortly after winning a case for one of his firm's most important clients, is fired, he thinks, because his partners have discovered that he has AIDS. Denzel Washington is the attorney he hires to sue his old firm. The movie, I thought, could serve as a commentary on our text. When Hanks is called into a partners' meeting to be fired, he is seated across the room, separated from his partners – with whom he has played hand-ball, taken showers – by a huge expanse of conference room and table. They deny that it is because of his condition but privately articulate all the stereotypes and misunderstanding and misinformation about the disease and how it is contracted – and in the process sound like the cultural boundary keepers and controllers Jesus challenged.

When Hanks goes to Washington's office to ask him to take his case there is a subtle sequence. Washington expresses the quintessential homophobic, macho stereotypes – and when Hanks, shortly after they have shaken hands, says simply, "I have AIDS," Washington physically withdraws, walks to the corner of the room and virtually, though unconsciously, wipes his hand on his pant leg.

In the motion picture, Hanks' disease takes its inevitable course, but his illness is healed by other people. . . who, to some critics, seem too good, too loving and accepting to be real, but to me suggested that there are alternatives, that God's Kingdom is always present even if somewhat hidden and that we can – all of us – be citizens of that Kingdom by respecting and including and welcoming and affirming all of God's children. In "Philadelphia" Tom Hanks' family shows that kingdom in a way one wishes the church would. Hanks is welcomed, loved, affirmed by brothers, sisters, father and mother, who hug him and kiss him. In one particularly important scene he cradles and feeds a bottle to his sister's new-born infant.

A few days after seeing the motion picture, I read an editorial in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, a journal I read, about a young twenty-year-old man, a Christian, a Presbyterian in fact, who committed suicide. The newspaper article had reported the young man's story by illustrating from his personal diary. He was gay. His family believed, because their church told them, that homosexuality was wrong, a sin, worse yet, an abomination to God. The young man accepted his church's and family's judgment, received psychotherapy and when that didn't work, went to a series of Christian counselors. He and his parents talked and prayed and in the

meantime he chronicled his struggle in his personal diary. He prayed to God for saving and healing. His diary reveals how hard he tried. Sometimes he shared his battle with God:

> "I'm sorry. You are so good to me and then I act like this. I could be good and obedient if I wanted to but I don't. I want things my way. I wonder if you'll send me to hell for this." At the close of this entry he writes, "Bye, I wish I could write love. But that would be dumb cause how could I love you and act the way I do?"

David Steele, a Presbyterian minister who wrote the editorial, goes on. . .

> "The ideas his family perceived to be the teaching of their church became an obsession, at least for son and mother. He was a terrible sinner. God could not love him. Fifteen days before he jumped off an expressway bridge into the path of a semi, he wrote, 'For with God nothing will be impossible.'"

At his funeral his mother recalls the minister said something like,

> "Bobby was gay. When you get caught up in the gay lifestyle, that's where you end up."

His mother no longer attends her church. [*The Presbyterian Outlook*, January 24, 1994]

Jesus, moved with pity – or was it anger – stretched out his hand and touched him.

> "The essence of Christianity," Scottish scholar, the late William Barclay said, "is to touch the untouchable, to love the unlovable, to forgive the unforgivable."

As the churches in our country, including our own, continue to struggle with issues of human sexuality and sexual orientation, and who can belong and who can be ordained and what the Bible says and what the Bible means and what God's will is and what Jesus would do, may we simply remember this story and our dear Lord, the one who was crucified for challenging the moral certainties and the social structures and the religious exclusiveness of his day. May we remember, for Christ's own sake, him stretching out his hand in pity – and perhaps in anger – and touching a man with leprosy.

It is a deceptively and radically subversive story Professor Crossan warns. It is also intensely personal.

There are some of us who feel unclean, unacceptable, untouchable – all the time; persons who for one reason or another, not confined to sexual practices, have been rejected by family or friends or community, and who have concluded that they are unclean in God's sight. And I have concluded that many of us, maybe even most of us, sooner or later have those feelings, at least occasionally; feelings that there is something we have done or something about us that is unacceptable, unfit, unclean. And I have concluded that all of us have theological problems with a love so amazing, inclusive, so strong, so challenging, that its impetus is to include not exclude, to gather in particularly those everyone else wants to keep out; a love which has no conditions but wants only to be received.

Who doesn't know about that? I think it's part of the reason we come to church – to hear good news; to be challenged ourselves to exhibit God's Kingdom, but also to hear that it is for us too: that Jesus Christ reaches out his hand to touch you and me. The essence of Christianity is to touch the untouchable, love the unlovable, forgive the unforgivable, and sometimes that means you. . . me.

I started to come to those conclusions about us and about the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ, sitting in a scholarly lecture being delivered by the late James McCord, former President of Princeton Theological Seminary and one of the best theologians we have produced. It was on some imposing topic like "Grace and the Moral Imperative," and it ranged widely through the disciplines of literature, philosophy, theology, touching on the major historical crises of the twentieth century. It was at the end, McCord was winding down, and he said something like. . .

"I never know how to get out of a lecture like this. So let's sing a hymn. . . a hymn that lifts up the Gospel message in the very face of the world's trauma and tragedy which have a way of becoming our own personal traumas and tragedies."

And I assumed he would cite one of the great German chorals by J. S. Bach or Martin Luther, or one of Calvin's great Geneva Hymns. I was surprised, although I no longer am, when he cited the old spiritual and it is how I propose you and I end this exercise in pondering this amazing story – about this amazing man.

"There is a balm in Gilead
to make the wounded whole.
There is a balm in Gilead
to heal the sin-sick soul."